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Opening extract from

Run Rabbit Run

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Run Rabbit Run

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One

Rochdale, 1942

You know how it is when you've got a secret and you can't tell anybody? And you have to go to school and pretend everything's normal, even when you know it's not? Well, it was like that on the first day back after Christmas.

The war had been going on for ages – horrible things like rationing, blackouts and air-raid sirens happened all the time. On and on and on. But that day I had a secret, and I had something to look forward to.

'Heads down, children. Copy the sums into your exercise books,' said Miss Rossendale, who was teaching us now because Mr Taylor had joined the army to fight the Germans. I liked Mr Taylor. He was young with a big smiley face and he didn't shout like Miss Rossendale. She was very old, and she had wrinkles and wagged her finger a lot. But that day I didn't mind cos my secret was keeping me happy.

I didn't even mind when Podgy Watson, who sat next to me on the front row, whispered nasty things about my dad. And I wasn't bothered at break when nobody would play with me except Brenda Watkins, who suffered from rashes.

The secret was special. 'Not a word, mind,' Dad had said when he told me. 'Not even to our Freddie. We'll tell him soon enough. It'll be just the two of us for now.' Which

had made me feel very grown-up.

That wasn't the only secret we shared. Two months ago, after the bomb fell on Mum's shop and killed her, Dad told me another one. 'Can you see that star, Lizzie?' he'd asked once when I couldn't sleep.

There were a lot of stars in the sky that night but he'd pointed his finger at the brightest, shiniest one of all.

'There's your mum,' he'd said, tapping his nose like he always does when he tells me secrets. 'So now you know she'll always be there, twinkling away, watching out for us.'

It's true. I see her every night as clear as anything. Sometimes we chat. Except when it's cloudy.

But Dad's new secret was different, and all day at school I couldn't think about anything else. The first lesson of the afternoon was geography and Podgy Watson left me alone because he was concentrating on a scab on his knee. He said it looked like a map of Africa and he spent most of the lesson picking it off and eating it. But when he'd finished he looked across at me and smirked and I could tell that he'd come up with a new way to torment me. He reached for a red crayon and started to write; when he was finished he slid the piece of paper onto my desk.

I shouldn't have read it. I knew it would be bad. But I couldn't help it.

EVERYBODY KNOWS YOUR DAD KILLED YOUR MUM
THAT'S WHY THEY WON'T HAVE HIM
IN THE ARMY

I could feel my face flush red and I screwed the paper into a ball. It was a horrible thing to say. Terrible! *A lie!*

So I jabbed him in the leg with my compass.

Twice.

It wasn't much. No more than a pinprick. Really. But he screamed like a stuck pig, 'Aaaaahhhhgggg!' and jumped out of his seat, holding onto his leg and waving his arm in the air. 'Miss! Miss!' he called out. 'Lizzie Butterworth stabbed me! Miss, I'm bleeding!'

Miss Rossendale, who was at the back of the classroom helping Brenda Watkins with her writing, looked over. Podgy was leaping up and down, squealing and yelling and clutching onto his leg as Miss Rossendale marched to the front with a face as black as thunder.

Now I was for it. I pushed my glasses further onto my nose, sat up straight and looked innocent. I held my breath and waited for the teacher to speak.

She stood in front of our desk, leaned forward and frowned – which made the wrinkly lines between her eyes even deeper so she looked like Dracula. Really! My heart was beating at a hundred miles an hour as she raised her hand and pointed her finger. But she wasn't pointing it at me.

'Roger Watson!' she shouted. 'This is the behaviour of a three-year-old not an eleven-year-old boy. Mr Taylor has left me instructions on how to deal with you. Now go to Miss Oxley's room and she will give you the punishment you deserve.'

What an escape! She hadn't even checked Podgy's leg for damage. Mr Taylor would have done.

'It was her, miss,' he protested. 'I didn't do nothing!'

But Miss Rossendale stretched out her arm and pointed at the door. 'Go!' she said, and he limped out of the classroom with his head bowed. We didn't see him for the rest of the day.

When the bell went for home time, I walked towards the gate as usual, but immediately saw Podgy standing on the corner of Derby Street with four of his mates. Just in case they were waiting for me, I hung back for ten minutes, hoping they would go. When they didn't, I decided to walk out, bold as you like, as if I hadn't seen them.

'Hey!' called Podgy. 'I want to speak to you, Lizzie Butterworth.'

I knew I was in trouble. I pretended not to hear. I stuffed my hands in my coat pockets and kept walking.

But Podgy and his gang crossed over and headed towards me. 'Got wax in your ears, have yer?' he said, barging me with his shoulder so that I came to a halt. His mates made a circle around me. I couldn't escape. Five against one.

'I've heard things about your dad, I have,' Podgy said with a sneer. 'Everybody's talking. Why hasn't he joined up, eh? Doesn't he know there's a war on?'

'Course he does,' I said.

'Then why isn't he off fighting? *Our* dads are over in France, aren't they, lads?'

'Yeah, they are,' the gang agreed, sounding like a flock of *baaa*-ing sheep.

They moved forward and closed in on me. 'Go on,' said Podgy, 'why hasn't he joined up? Eh? Eh? Eh?'

I glanced about, hoping someone might come to my rescue, but the kids who were passing just pretended not to notice and hurried home.

Podgy lifted his fat fist and punched my shoulder so that I staggered back and slipped on the wet pavement, banging my head on the flagstones and sending my glasses and my gas mask case flying.

'Go on, say it! He's a coward,' yelled Podgy as he grabbed my coat collar and heaved me into a standing position. 'Your dad's too scared to fight.'

'He's not scared!' I shouted as loud as I could. 'He's a conscientious objector.'

Nobody spoke. Then Podgy shoved me away, pinning me against the wall. 'And what's that in plain English?'

I tried to keep my voice calm even though I was shaking inside. 'A conscientious objector doesn't believe in killing people. They don't believe it's right to go to war.'

Podgy stepped back, folding his arms across his chest and smiling a nasty, mean sort of smile. 'I've heard my mum talk about men like your dad. They call 'em conchies. She says it's just another word for coward.' Then he moved forward and spat in my face.

The spittle dripped onto my coat while the gang whooped and clapped and called, 'Conchie Coward! Conchie Coward!

Conchie Coward!' while they jigged around in a circle like a pack of Red Indians on the warpath.

Podgy stood rocking with laughter and that's when I took my chance. I lowered my head and rammed it hard into his stomach. WAM!

His mouth fell open in surprise as the breath was forced out of him. His feet skidded on the pavement and he crashed into his mates, dragging them down with him until they were all lying in one great, wet heap.

I didn't hang around, of course. I grabbed my glasses and scarpered. If they caught me I'd be history. They were shouting after me but I kept running until I reached the end of the street and then I tore round the corner into Durham Road.

It was there that I ran slap bang into Aunt Dotty.

Two

Dad says family is very important. But I don't think Aunt Dotty can be *real* family. She's supposed to be Dad's sister, but she's not a bit like him. She's a mean, skinny old witch who never laughs. I think Granny must have found her on the doorstep in a basket when she was a baby – but no one's ever said. Being abandoned can't be very nice though. No wonder Aunt Dotty has a terrible temper.

'Speak when you're spoken to,' she often says. Or, 'Watch your manners or you'll get what for.' Or, 'There'll be no tea for you, my girl.'

Knowing what she was like, I wouldn't have bumped into her that day on purpose – but I didn't know she was round the corner with our Freddie, did I?

She made a terrible fuss, as if I'd done it on purpose. She squealed and cried, 'Oh, oh,' while she straightened her hat and brushed down her coat. Then she glared at me with her mean little eyes. 'Why can't you look where you're going, stupid child?'

My cousin, Toffee-nosed Pat, was with them and she loved to see me in trouble. 'Lizzie's been fighting,' she said, pointing to the cut on my chin. 'It's that school, Mother. There are some awful children there.' She looked at me and smirked. 'You should go to the convent school like me. We have a proper uniform and everything. It's ever so nice.'

Aunt Dotty, still in a temper, grabbed hold of my coat collar and marched me down the street. 'Home, my girl,' she snapped.

Every afternoon Aunt Dotty fetched Freddie from the infant school and took him to our house, I would join them and then she waited with us till Dad came back from work. But today, thanks to Podgy Watson, I was late getting home. Just a few minutes late and she'd come looking for me.

'Get those wet things off before you catch your death of cold,' she said when we got home. 'Just look at the state of you. What would your mother say if she knew you'd been fighting?'

I thought of Mum with her red curls and her big smile and I knew what she'd say: 'You're a bad 'un, sure enough, our Lizzie – just like me at your age.' And then she'd roar with laughter and wrap her arms around me in a big hug. That was Mum, and I couldn't help smiling at the thought of her.

Aunt Dotty must have seen. 'So you think it's funny, do you?' she cried lashing out, grabbing hold of my ear and pulling me towards her with such a force that I cried in pain. 'I'll teach you to laugh at me.' She shook me like a rag doll before slapping me hard across my legs. 'Let that be a lesson.' She smacked me again so hard that my leg stung as if I'd been attacked by a dozen wasps. I gritted my teeth determined not to cry. I wouldn't! She didn't stop. She slapped me again as if she wouldn't be satisfied until she'd made me.

It was only when our Freddie screamed, 'No! Don't you hurt my sister!' that she let her hand fall to her side and turned away.

Her face was screwed up with anger as she went over to the table and cut a loaf into slices, spreading them with dripping. When she was done, she pointed the knife at me and said, 'Not a word from you, my lady. Now sit down and eat your tea.'

There were three plates. She put bread and dripping on two of them. The other was empty until she fetched a brown paper parcel from her shopping basket, took out two strawberry-jam sandwiches and put them on Pat's plate.

'Thank you, Mother,' said Toffee-nosed Pat, picking up her sandwich and smirking at us. She did this every day, and every day we watched her bite into the jam and wished that we could taste it. But we never did.

The table was by the window overlooking the mill opposite. That day I sat there, feeling my leg stinging from the slaps and I looked up at the darkening sky and blinked my eyes dry.

Lucky the stars weren't out yet, I thought. If Mum had been looking down . . . well, she'd have gone barmy seeing Aunt Dotty hitting me like that.

I ate my sandwich slowly, hoping that Dad would come home before I'd finished it. He would cheer me up.

But when he did arrive, I was confused. I thought he'd rush in, all happy and glad to be home. But no. His shoulders drooped; his forehead was wrinkled with worry lines. Had he forgotten our secret? Wasn't it the most exciting secret in the world? I wondered.

He sat on the empty chair at the table while Aunt Dotty brewed a pot of tea. 'So what happened at the appeal?' she asked.

'What's an appeal?' Freddie wanted to know.

'It's when some important people ask you lots of questions,' Dad told him.

'What questions?'

'About why I don't want to fight in the war.'

Aunt Dotty looked at Dad and scowled. 'I suppose you gave them a lot of fancy words, did you?'

Dad looked up at her. 'I told them what I told that committee two months ago – I didn't believe in war and that I wouldn't go killing anybody. War is bad, that's what I said. There was no good to be gained from fighting wars.'

'And they let you off to go and plant potatoes, did they?'

Dad sighed and shook his head. 'I didn't stand a chance. Major Thompson and Doctor Hill were on the appeal committee.'

'Well, they wouldn't be impressed,' said Aunt Dotty, who couldn't stop a mean little smile spreading across her face. 'Both the major and the doctor fought in the first war, and their sons are out there fighting now. What did they say?'

'They told me I should join the army. "You're young enough and strong enough," they said. "None of this silly talk about not wanting to fight." They thought I was making excuses. They thought I was a coward.'

Aunt Dotty stood there with her arms folded. 'So they won't let you be a conchie?'

'The lady on the committee said they might let me work in the munitions factory. But I said no. I won't make bombs and bullets that will kill people.'

'Well, that's it then.'

'But why won't they let me carry on working at the yard? I do useful work. I keep those lorries running, don't I?' He ran his fingers through his hair and frowned. 'They said if I don't report to the barracks tomorrow, I'll be sent to prison.'

'Just what I thought. So you'll just have to join up like everybody else.'

'I will not!' Dad snapped. 'I'm not fighting in any war.'

She wagged her finger at him. 'They were right. You *are* a coward! Nothing but a coward!'

'No. Not that,' said Dad, and he pushed back his chair and stood facing her.

We all stared at them, thinking they were going to have a proper fight. Freddie started to cry, so Dad turned round and picked him up.

'My children have suffered already, Dotty. Wasn't the bombing bad enough – taking their mother like that? I'll make sure they don't lose me an' all. We stay together.'

'Oh and how can you stay together if you're in prison?' asked Aunt Dotty, her face flushing pink.

By then, Freddie was crying louder than ever and Dad hugged him tight, trying to quieten him. 'I've already made plans. We're going away.'

I couldn't believe it. Dad had told her our secret. He *promised* it was our secret. Now she'd tell everybody. That was what she was like.

She stood with her hands on her hips. 'I might have guessed you'd go on the run,' she sneered. 'And what'll

happen when they find you? You'll finish up in prison anyway.'

The argument continued until Aunt Dotty said, 'I won't listen to another word,' and turned to fetch her coat. 'If you won't join up, there's no more to be said, is there? Ready, Patricia?'

As she opened the door to step onto the street, she turned and looked at Dad. 'If you can't behave like a man and fight, then you're no brother of mine and I'll not have anything to do with you ever again. Our mother would be ashamed of you.'

I jumped up from my chair, shaking with anger. 'Don't you speak to my dad like that!' I yelled. '*Your* mother would be ashamed of *you*!'

Aunt Dotty's mouth fell open and her face changed to a peculiar shade of purple. Without another word, she marched out with her head in the air, followed by Toffee-nosed Pat.

Freddie stopped crying as soon as they'd gone. Dad winked at me and sat Freddie on his knee. He was going to tell him our secret. That was all right. My brother had to know sometime.

'I've got something to tell you, little chap,' he said. 'Tomorrow morning, we'll get up very early.'

'Why?' asked Freddie.

'Because we're going on holiday.'

'Are we going to Blackpool?'

Dad shook his head. 'No. We're going to Gloucestershire,' he said. 'Would you like that?'

But Freddie didn't know where Gloucestershire was and he started crying again.

'It's in the country,' I said. 'There'll be cows and sheep and things.'

'We're going to a place called Whiteway,' Dad said, 'and we'll have a grand time.'

But there was one thing worrying me. I had to ask. 'Will the police come looking for us, Dad? Will they take you to prison like Aunt Dotty said?'

'No one will find us, Lizzie. It will be our secret place.' He gave me a hug and then he said, 'Mr Hollingsworth from the builders' yard is going to take us in his lorry. His brother lives at Whiteway and we're going to stay with him.'

At the mention of riding in a lorry, Freddie's eyes grew wide with excitement and he grinned. For him it was even better than going on holiday.

Of course, I knew we weren't going on holiday. Who goes on holiday in January? But Freddie was only five. He didn't know that.

'How long are we going for, Dad?' I asked.

Dad looked at me and shook his head. 'I don't know, Lizzie, that all depends on Mr Hitler.'

Three

Very early the next morning, Dad woke me up. 'Get dressed, Lizzie. Time to go.'

It was freezing so I got dressed under the bedclothes. With a bit of wriggling I pulled on my socks, my vest and knickers, my thickest jersey and my wool skirt, then I flung back the blankets and jumped out. On with shoes and glasses. Job done.

Dad had already carried Freddie downstairs.

I blew out the candle and opened the blackout curtains. The window was covered in frost but I rubbed a circle in it so I could look up into the still-dark sky, just to check that Mum was there. She was. Twinkling brightly, as usual. 'We're going away,' I said – but I think she already knew.

Freddie and I ate bread and cheese, washed our faces in the sink in the back kitchen and went to the lav in the yard.

Those were the last thing we did in our house in Norwich Street.

'Coats,' Dad ordered, then we pulled on the balaclavas Granny had knitted last winter and Dad put his cap on before he opened the door and we all stepped out into the street holding onto our gas masks and the suitcases we had packed the night before.

We walked with our heads down, the bitterly cold wind whipping round our legs.

Mr Hollingsworth was meeting us at the builders' yard at the top of our road. Dad had worked there ever since he left school. Sometimes, in the school holidays, he'd take us and show us round – and we loved that. The yard was crammed with all sorts of things: stacks of bricks, piles of wood, bags of cement. And, to make it more exciting, there were plenty of rats running under the sheds and between bags of plaster. Sometimes Dad set traps and I watched him, worried that he'd catch his fingers – but he never did. Our dad was really clever. He mended the lorries when they broke down and he knew about building houses and that. No problem.

That morning, an open-back lorry was parked under the sign that read R & T HOWARTH BUILDERS MERCHANTS and I saw Mr Hollingsworth leaning against the cab. We waved and he waved back. 'How do, Will?' he called. 'How do, Lizzie, Freddie?'

Freddie raced ahead. 'We're going on holiday,' he said, jumping up and down in front of Mr Hollingsworth.

'Are you indeed?' he laughed. 'Then we'd better get started.'

Dad lifted us into the cab. Mr Hollingsworth climbed in the other side and sat in the driver's seat so that all four of us were squashed up together.

'Everybody ready?' he asked, putting the key in the ignition.

'Ready!' we answered and we cheered when the engine started with a roar and we set off.

As we drove down Norwich Street, we passed our house – I'd lived there for eleven years, ever since I was born – and I thought about Mum. How she had played hopscotch with us

on the flags outside our front door and helped us make dens in the back yard. I tried not to feel sad because I knew she was up there watching us. I bet she was waving.

When we reached the end of the street and pulled onto the main road, Dad said, 'Thanks for giving us a lift, Reg. It's very good of you.'

'Say nowt about it, lad,' Mr Hollingsworth answered, puffing at his old pipe. 'You'll be safe enough at Whiteway. And you nippers will have a grand old time. You'll have woods and fields to run about in and Arthur will see you right.'

'Is Arthur your brother?' I asked.

He nodded. 'He built a house in Whiteway years ago. In the middle of a wood. It's not big but you'll like it.'

'Is it like Red Riding Hood's house?' Freddie wanted to know.

'Not exactly. There aren't any wolves.'

There were lots of things I wanted to know about his brother too. After all, we were going to live with him and I knew Mr Hollingsworth wouldn't mind if I asked. 'Why did your brother go to Whiteway? Why didn't he stay in Rochdale, like you?'

Mr Hollingsworth waited at the traffic lights before turning right behind a double-decker bus. 'It's a long story,' he said. 'But I'll tell you, if you like' – he drew on his pipe and puffed out a stream of grey smoke before he continued – 'Arthur was only eighteen when the first war started against Germany. He went and joined up because he thought it would be a great adventure. He wanted to travel to countries he'd never seen.'

'And did he?'

'He went to a place in Belgium called Ypres – the English soldiers called it Wipers.'

'Did he have an adventure in Wipers?' Freddie asked.

'No. He was stuck in dirty trenches in the freezing cold with no lavatories and bullets flying around.'

'That's not an adventure,' said Freddie. 'I would have come home straight away.'

'Well, he couldn't. He had to stay and fight the Germans.'

Freddie looked up at Dad. 'Why don't *you* fight the Germans? They dropped that bomb on Mum, didn't they?' he said. 'That's only fair.'

Dad shook his head. 'But that would make me just like the people who killed her, wouldn't it?' he said. 'If we all refused to fight there wouldn't be a war at all.'

After that Dad went quiet for a bit and looked out of the side window. I suppose he was thinking about Mum, but I wanted to hear more about Mr Hollingsworth's brother.

'What happened in Wipers?'

'The Germans had a terrible weapon called mustard gas. Arthur said it was horrible greeny-yellow stuff that drifted across the battlefields towards the soldiers.'

'Like smoke?'

He nodded. 'Aye, and they breathed it in. Thousands of soldiers died. Most of Arthur's friends did.' Mr Hollingsworth sighed and drew on his pipe again. 'After that our Arthur hated war with a vengeance. "What's the point of it all?" he used to say.'

'But he didn't die, did he?'

'No. But the gas injured his lungs so much that he could hardly breathe.' Mr Hollingsworth looked sad. 'He was sent back to England and stayed in hospital for a long time. While he was there a man in the next bed told him about Whiteway. He said that some people had set up a commune, living and working together, with their own rules. They didn't believe in war and they welcomed anyone.'

'Anyone?'

'Anyone who was in trouble. People escaping their own country. People who didn't want to fight – they were called conscientious objectors.'

'Like our dad,' I said.

'Like your dad.'

'So your brother decided to go Whiteway?'

'Aye. He thought it sounded just the place for him so he went, and he's lived there ever since.'

All this time, Dad had sat staring out not saying a word. Mr Hollingsworth must have noticed because he said, 'Don't worry, Will. You're doing the right thing. Remember all those lads killed in the first war? Young lives cut short. Wives and mothers grieving. And for what? The Germans are back again. How many more will die before it's over?'

Dad didn't answer.

'Just think about it, Will. You've already lost your wife. Killing Germans won't bring her back, will it?' He pulled his pipe from his mouth and wagged it at Dad. 'You keep out of this rotten war. Mark my words, lad. There's nowt good going to come of it.'

We all sat there in a terrible sad silence until Freddie, who didn't like silence at all, started to sing:

'Run, rabbit, run, rabbit, run, run, run.
Run, rabbit, run, rabbit, run, run, run.
Bang, bang, bang, bang goes the farmer's gun.
Run, rabbit, run, rabbit, run, run, run.
Run, rabbit, run, rabbit, run, run, run.
Don't give the farmer his fun, fun, fun.
He'll get by without his rabbit pie,
So run, rabbit, run, rabbit, run, run, run.'

And we all joined in.

Funny that he should choose that song. We were now on the run just like the rabbit.